

## The Beaver Wars



My grandad always told me that we were one of the oldest European families in Canada, that we came over from France in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. He said that the family were Christian pioneers, trading with the indigenous people and setting up villages where we grew wheat and rye and spread the word of God. I wasn't too sure how much was true, apart from the French bit which is obvious from our name, but when I retired and was contemplating what to do with the rest of my life I decided to find out.

I started by looking through grandad's belongings that my mum had kept when he died. The most interesting thing was a page torn from a book with no text, just a portrait of a young man with a cloud of brown hair and a wispy moustache. He was clad in a black cloak with a large white ruff around his neck and sported a felt hat with a wide, floppy brim. He looked quite the dandy but I had no idea who he was as there was no name on the picture. I Googled the details of his dress and found out that it was probably from the late 16<sup>th</sup> to mid 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Next I signed up with an ancestry website, then to go further back, visited the Canadian National Archive in Montreal. In fact I almost moved in there, eventually managing to trace the Bouchard family tree back to the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century when we arrived from Dijon. Grandad was wrong about the farming and Christian part though. My ancestors were involved in the fur trade, shipping beaver pelts to Europe and arming the local Huron and Algonquin people against the Iroquois who were disrupting the trade in beaver pelts. I had learnt a little about the Beaver Wars of the 17<sup>th</sup> century at school but didn't know that my family were caught up in them or how vicious they were with thousands of indigenous people killed by each other and the French settlers. My nine and ten times great grandfathers, Rene and Anton Bouchard, were particularly active in the trade of furs and guns and responsible for the death of many native people. I wondered if grandad had known this.

All this just for beaver fur but why was it so valuable? I needed to do some more research so spent more hours online and at the library. It turned out that beaver pelts were primarily used to make high-end, waterproof felt hats, which were a major fashion staple across Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The dense underfur of the beaver was prized for its ability to felt (I didn't even know that was a verb), producing durable and luxurious hats.

On my last day in the library, I was re-reading a book on the Beaver Wars that I had previously skimmed through when I spotted a picture of a young man in a black cloak and a striking felt hat. Underneath was the caption 'Anton Bouchard, 1649-1705'